

## Getting the Tone Right

When you write a letter, it's important to get the tone right. Good tone is just good manners on paper. Readers want to know the writer has an interest in their problems. Be helpful and friendly.

### 1. Write in a conversational way.

If you would feel uncomfortable or awkward speaking out loud what you write, you probably haven't achieved a good tone. How would you feel if you had to say to someone, *I wish to inform you that . . .* This doesn't mean you should use slang, bad grammar, or poor English, but try to aim for a conversational style. If you wouldn't say it, don't write it.

Imagine that your reader is sitting opposite you at your desk or is on the telephone. You'd be unlikely to say, *please be advised* or *I wish to inform you*. Instead, you would be less formal and say *I can explain* or *Let me explain* or other everyday expressions. Avoid clichés. Many of the techniques discussed in the section on plain language drafting, such as using pronouns, active verbs, and contractions, will help you develop a conversational style.

### 2. Consider using direct questions.

Direct questions are an essential part of the spoken language and using them in writing gives your words much more impact. Much government writing hides questions by using words such as *whether* to disguise a question as a statement. This also tends to make your writing longer than necessary. There is no reason to avoid questions in government writing.

*Example:*

Instead of: *We would appreciate your advising us whether you want to attend the seminar on Problems of Aging Aircraft or the seminar on Preventing Runway Incursions.*

Use a question: *Would you prefer to attend the seminar on Problems of Aging Aircraft or the seminar on Preventing Runway Incursions?*

### 3. Respond to the writer's opening comments.

We often receive letters beginning with some opening comment that's not central to the purpose of the letter. Don't fail to respond to those comments when you write your response. For example, a writer may thank us for something or express appreciation. Don't use a standard formula, but tailor your response to the specific comment the sender included so it's clear you read the incoming letter and are responding to it.